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FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

FROM : AMEMBASSY, GUATEMALA — 450 DESP. NO.

TO : THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON. — November 24, 1953 DATE

REF : Embassy Despatch 449, November 24, 1953.

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SUBJECT: A Glimpse of Guatemalan "Democracy" In Action.

In an account giving some local color and insight into the social and cultural problems involved in the development of democratic processes in Guatemala, a plantation owner, educated abroad, has described to the Embassy the clashes of racial and social interests involved in the November 20-22 municipal elections in the small agricultural community of Santa Bárbara in the Department of Suchitepéquez on the Pacific slope. This village is in one of the richest farming areas of Guatemala.

According to the narrator, it became known around Santa Bárbara that the farm hands of a nearby national farm, who are mostly Indians, had gotten together and decided that they would elect the next mayor of the village, and it was generally believed that they were being stimulated by Communist ideals. This specter of an Indian-Communist coalition was shaking to the local politicians of the older Administration "Revolutionary" parties, who are ladinos and who sensed a threat to the traditional supremacy of the ladinos. The politicians joined together and approached the local finqueros (planters), their usual enemies, and said that this must not be allowed to happen. They agreed to nominate for mayor the son of the local storekeeper, a moderate young man acceptable to the finqueros, and the finqueros, including the narrator, passed the hat for a campaign fund. It was agreed that the incumbent mayor should obtain endorsement for the young man from the national headquarters of the Administration's Partido Acción Revolucionaria (PAR), on whose ticket he was to run.

Meanwhile, the Indians on the national farm had obtained some money and threw a fiesta which turned into a drunken brawl. The mayor sent in the police to restore order and, among those arrested were the Indians' candidate and his supporters. They were in jail when the time came to register their ticket, with the result that the young PAR candidate was registered as the Administration candidate. The narrator regarded his election as a foregone conclusion.

JCHill:cs
REPORTER

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This vignette, although given by a person opposed to the Administration, gives much of the flavor of local politics and the problems to be surmounted in a country whose 1950 census classifies over half of the population as Indians and almost 70% as illiterate. These factors, added to a lack of any tradition of democratic processes, suggest that such expressions as "free elections" and the other terminology of democracy as used in the United States must be understood in an entirely different context when applied to present day Guatemala.

FOR THE AMBASSADOR

William L. Krieg
Counselor of Embassy